

## CHILDHOOD IN MODERN LITERATURE.

THE dimpled darlings of our household, the little demi-deities of the cradle, do not grace the ancient as they do our modern literature. They were often enough in the arms of Greek mothers, but seldom in the writings of Greek fathers. The frightened Trojan babe, scared by the dazzling helm and nodding crest of Hector, is a charming picture, but slight as the painter's glimpse of a cherub. The "Iliad" gives no studied picture of childhood—gives it no expression like that of modern poetry.

The child—the sanctity, freshness, and mystery of child-life—in literature, owes its advancement beyond the idea of a healthy little animal to the worship of the infant Jesus. In contemporary literature childhood is a special and individual presence, not an accidental and accessory one. It was a French poet who made the most touching verses about the sweet and simple and enchanting life of children. Victor Hugo's "Les Enfants" is the first book of poetry which exclusively celebrates childhood; and it is a charming and pathetic volume, full of music, of tenderness, of tears, of brightness, felicitously called "The Mother's Book." The heart of a robust and grand poet has softened and melted before the altar of domestic life; he sings the ministrations of children. The untroubled laughter, the fleeting tears, the sinless dreams and memories, the glowing and spotless aspect of childhood, like the faces of cherubs smiling from funeral tablets, crowd out all sombre and bitter recollections of life. He says of a child, sleeping on the maternal bed, that "when his rose-eyelid closes on the earth, it is opened to heaven." Nothing like Victor Hugo's book is to be met with anterior to our century, which has advanced childhood to the same place in literature that it held in religion and art. When the monsters vanished, the child appeared. The dragon, the hydra, and the dwarf, which exhaust the descriptive powers of the old poets and romancers, have given place to the untouched and all-promising and exquisite child.

The cradle is the only undisturbed throne to-day. "Philip my King" is undisputed monarch on the mother's breast.

A modern poet has expressed the sanctity of the power of childhood when he makes the chagrined and despairing lover utter, in his inconsolable anguish—

"Baby fingers, waxen touches, press me from the mother's breast."

Miss Mulock's "Philip my King" is a beautiful expression of the royal grace and power of childhood. But, if less vivid as it is less of a portrait, more touching, because connected with the reflective and saddened spirit of the father, is Longfellow's poem of "Childhood."

The very flower of modern literature may be said to blossom in the sentiment inspired by childhood. That sentiment is

not pagan nor heathen; it is preëminently Christian. And what children it has consecrated in our memory! "Mignon," the unique, the studied, the profoundly-suggestive, and strange creation of the great Goethe—a truly "mysterious child; the daughter of enthusiasm, rapture, passion, and despair; she is of the earth, but not earthly." In our own literature we have "Pearl" and "Pansy," the creation of a poet, Hawthorne; we have "Topsy" and "Eva," the creation of a homely but dramatic genius, H. B. Stowe. And, in the children of Hawthorne's romances, what capricious and exquisite life! What contrast! What rainbow-tints opposed to the fixed and sombre

destiny of the unhappy mother! What delicacy of color; what play of sentiment. What charm, as of pearled dew-drops! What cooling freshness, as of their lucid beauty! These figures of childhood are special to our literature.

Sad like a mute household, grave like a senate-chamber, stormy like a mob, and gorgeous like a festival, are those pages of literature anterior to our modern epoch, which never show us the untroubled face, the glad glance, and the beautiful smile of childhood. The presence of childhood in our modern literature is beautiful like its dimpled hand on a white beard—something tender, soft, rosy, feeble, irresistible. Childhood in letters is like the blossomful branch in spring-time—fragile beauty of texture and color laid on the rough limbs and over the grasping roots of sturdy life. The child is light and fresh and beautiful in letters as in life.

Long before our modern literature embodied much of the life of children, art had scattered its laughing and smoothly-curved images over the fronts of palaces, about altars, and in pictures. The first service of art was religious, and the Christian religion had devoted it to the cradle in Bethlehem. Where the *child* has not been, where its presence is not felt in literature, we have distressing and agitating writing; we have the wan splendor and misery of life laid before us, at best the triumph of power and passion. The child changes all that is sombre, and transmutes all that is tragic, into all that is hopeful. Childhood is the very flower of life: how could it be less than a joyous garland in letters for the stricken brow of thought? It is sad only when touched with our sadness, and cursed by our want. We can look into the blue eyes of children, and think of lakes; we look at their curly, careless heads, and are gladdened as by sunshine; at their cheeks, and are pleased as by the soft petals of flowers.

The literature of despair would have one ray of light if childhood appeared in it. What a relief to overtaxed sympathies is the presence of children in "Werther!" What gladness we have to see the shining, heedless heads of the little ones about "Charlotte!"

Children have been individualized in modern literature. The sculptors of the renaissance, as its painters, did not represent the individual. They generalized ; the cherubs of the painters and sculptors are typical. The first child that inspires a profound and personal interest is Goethe's "Mignon ;" it is subtly individualized. Less poetic, less imaginative, as creations, but closer to us, are Mrs. Stowe's "Topsy" and "Eva," George Eliott's "Maggie," and Charlotte Brontë's creation in "Vilette." Wordsworth's little girl in "We are Seven" is suggestive and touching ; the simplicity and naïve persistency of childhood were never more felicitously expressed. Aldrich's reputation as a poet was made by, and will probably rest upon, "Babie Bell," with its music and fancy and charm, and the perfumed and dainty and touching grace of which mixes with our very dreams of babyhood, and seems not less exquisite than the gift of its life.

It is worthy of remark, that authors, whose genius is fed by passion, have not given any place to childhood in their writings. Victor Hugo is the only exception. Neither in the works of Alfred de Musset, nor in George Sand, nor in Rousseau, nor in Burns, nor in Poe, do we find the figure of a child. Writers deficient in passion, but tender and contemplative, like Wordsworth, Longfellow, Whittier, and Hawthorne, or simply domestic, like Mrs. Stowe, have frequently given us portraits of children, and have expressed the beautiful fact and sentiment of their most personal life.

Hail to children ! Their glad faces, their fleeting tears, their playfulness, have interested us more than "Tom Jones" or the "Red-Cross Knight." "Cosette" is almost as beautiful as "heavenly Una." Children ! They rule the world. The mother and the child are the two sacredest figures in our modern life and literature. We have no fair and fatal Venus, no Druid priestess, no white vestal, keeping the sacred fires of sanguinary

altars, but simply woman and child to enlist the enthusiasm of love. A blossomless bough, a fruitless tree, a nestless bush—these are not more dull and dead to the eye than a home without children. Literature not graced by them may be grave and grand, stormy and splendid ; it may be tragic with passion like Byron, melancholy like Lamartine, lyric with love like De Musset, but it has nothing of the pure and tender spirit of the most beautiful pages consecrated to childhood.